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ABSTRACT

Until researchers achieve a breakthrough on comprehending what comprehending is all about, teachers need help on how to help students comprehend what they are reading. According to schema theory, students must be able to pronounce almost all key words and have schemata previously instantiated (know the meanings of almost all key words) in order to comprehend a passage. A common solution is to pre-teach key words, which works well for good students who wait patiently, but does not work well for students who are impatient, cannot learn quickly, or who can forget what a words means quickly. What teachers should do is to stay three weeks ahead of their students; build daily vocabulary exercises, drill on recognition, meaning, and spelling of key words; drill on related words; and drill on words that are being missed or might be missed. The result is student excitement that they already know the words in a story without having to sit through all the "pre-story" stuff. (RS)

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by
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Reprint Series #633

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Comprehension & Schema Theory:

A *Practical* Application

By

Don McCabe

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What is AVKO?

AVKO is a non-profit tax-exempt membership organization founded in 1974 that is:

- subsidized by donations and grants.
- open to membership to anyone interested in helping others learn to read and write.
- run by members from as far away as Hawaii and Quebec and whose daily operations are handled by volunteers.
- planning to build and operate a model reading research center in a YEAR-AROUND **camp** setting that would economically and efficiently service the needs of dyslexics of all ages.
- trying to spread the concept that parent and spouse tutoring in spelling/reading skills can be successfully taught in adult community education classes and that members of a problem reader's support group can greatly assist the efforts of any volunteer tutor working in the literacy movement.
- providing newsletters and economical opportunities to pursue individual research projects and to take part in large scale cooperative research projects that have immediate practical applications.
- attempting to accomplish these goals primarily through the profits generated by the inservices, workshops and the sale of materials developed for the special needs of students, parents, and adults – but AVKO still needs donations to survive.

Comprehension / Schema Theory: A Practical Application

The studies on schema theory that are going on at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, will lead, perhaps, to a breakthrough on comprehending what comprehending is all about. In the meantime, teachers need help on how to help kids comprehend what they are reading.

ONE SIMPLIFIED HYPOTHESIS RELATED TO SCHEMA THEORY:

In order to comprehend a passage a student must:

1. Be able to pronounce almost all key words. (Reason: Failure in decoding key words often sets up blockages that inhibit the comprehension process.)

2. Have schemata previously instantiated. Translation: know the meanings of almost all key words.

ONE COMMON SOLUTION THAT WE ALL KNOW:

Pre-teach key words before beginning the selection.

THE GOOD NEWS: The technique of pre-teaching key words works well for students who:

1. are reading at or above grade level,

2. are well motivated,

3. wait patiently for the "work" to end so they can begin the story or assignment, and

4. have closely related background schemata so well instantiated, they can quickly instantiate the new schemata or

5. have the "background experience" to quickly instantiate the "new" key vocabulary that is essential to comprehending the passage.

THE BAD NEWS:

The technique of pre-teaching DOESN'T work for the "poor" students who:

1. can't wait patiently,

2. can't learn quickly,

3. CAN FORGET what a word is or what it means almost as fast as you can write it on the chalkboard.

THE PARADOX:

If you MASTERY pre-teach the pre-teaching and ***only if*** you MASTERY pre-teach the pre-teaching, you can skip the pre-teaching that the kids who need it the most, hate the most. (You might have to re-read that five times!)

THE PLOT THICKENS:

Most textbooks have exercises and questions on vocabulary and key concepts for each selection. Instead of following their directions what you must do is:

1. stay three weeks ahead of your kids,

2. build your daily vocabulary exercises on the reading selections you will be giving your kids three weeks later,

3. drill on recognition of the key words,

4. drill on the meaning of the key words,

5. drill on the spelling of the key words,

6. drill on related words, related ideas, related experiences, etc.

7. drill on words you know are being missed or will be missed,

8. or in other words, teach well for three weeks and then when you get to the lesson, you DON'T have to pre-teach the key words!

THE RESULT:

"Hey, I know that word! We studied that two weeks ago, didn't we?"

EXCITEMENT.

Little Sean reads confidently the name of Jose that occurs in his reader that conscientiously includes ethnic names. Jose is not embarrassed by someone reading his name as Josie. Fidgety Phyllis who can't stand boring work (including the vocabulary drills we are advocating) at least can ENJOY the stories because she now doesn't have to listen to all the horrible "PRE-STORY" stuff that turns her off and tunes her out.

HELP WANTED:

We have not encountered any systematic studies on the effect on comprehension of MASTERY PRE-TEACHING of all key words, ideas, and necessary modes of apprehending a selection WEEKS IN ADVANCE to the reading of the selection. We would appreciate it if some of our AVKO members (or university researchers) would give it a try and send us their results. Please write:

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